

A Structuralist Analysis of Narrative Structure in Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*

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Abstract

The research shows how the central contrast between the Prince and the Pauper organizes the entire fictional world, creating a series of oppositions such as wealth versus poverty and justice versus injustice. Clothing is analyzed as a powerful yet arbitrary symbol of social status, where a character's appearance dictates their reality and the treatment they receive from others. Furthermore, the novel's parallel plot structure, which strategically alternates the narrative point of view between Tom and Edward, is identified as the core mechanism driving this critique. This technique forces the reader to compare two social extremes, thereby actively constructing an understanding of the story's critical message. The ending is interpreted not as a restoration of the initial order, but as the formation of a new, more enlightened equilibrium, in which the protagonists are transformed by their journey.

In conclusion, this study establishes that in *The Prince and the Pauper*, narrative form is inseparable from its critical content. The story's structure itself serves as the primary vehicle for Twain's profound social and political commentary

Keywords: *Structuralism, Mark Twain, The Prince and the Pauper, Narratology, Social Criticism*

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Introduction

Literature serves as a foundational social institution, a medium through which society reflects upon, interprets, and critiques itself. As a representation of human life and aspiration, a literary work is not merely an object of entertainment but a complex system of signs that engages with social reality, offering guidance, moral valuation, and a critical lens on the world. It is within this framework of literature as a vehicle for social commentary that the works of the American author Mark Twain find their most potent force. While often celebrated for his distinctive humour and regional storytelling, Twain's most enduring contributions to the literary canon are arguably his incisive critiques of societal hypocrisy, systemic injustice, and the ingrained prejudices of his time. His narratives frequently dissect the stark contrasts between professed ideals and practiced realities, making him one of the most formidable social critics in American letters.

His 1881 novel, *The Prince and the Pauper*, occupies a unique and often misunderstood place within his literary oeuvre. On the surface, it presents itself as a charming historical romance, a "tale for young people of all ages," as Twain himself subtitled it. This perception, reinforced by its fairy-tale-like premise of switched identities, has led to its frequent categorization as a work of children's literature, with critical focus often limited to its adventurous plot and sentimental conclusion. However, to confine the novel to this reading is to overlook the sophisticated and deeply embedded social critique that constitutes its very foundation. Far from being a simple fable, *The Prince and the Pauper* is a work of biting social satire, one in which Twain's profound indignation towards social injustice, the rigidities of class hierarchy, and the arbitrary nature of identity is not merely a thematic overlay but is fundamentally encoded within the novel's narrative architecture. This study moves beyond traditional thematic interpretations to argue that the novel's critique is an emergent property of its form, demonstrating an inextricable link between narrative structure and ideological commentary. The central premise—two identical boys, the pauper Tom Canty and the prince Edward Tudor, exchanging clothes and lives—provides the perfect allegorical framework for Twain to explore the superficiality of social distinctions and the profound impact of environment on human experience.

In recent years, academic scholarship on *The Prince and the Pauper* has continued to explore its critical dimensions, yet these analyses have predominantly been conducted through thematic and sociological lenses, focusing on the novel as a reflection of societal ills rather than as a formal construction that generates critique. For instance, a study from UIN Malang (2018) effectively employs a sociological approach to identify Twain's "satirical messages" targeting the English social class structure and political landscape. This research successfully pinpoints *what* aspects of society were the objects of his satire, such as the negligence of law enforcement and the resulting societal disorder, but it treats the novel primarily as a conduit for these messages. Similarly, a more recent analysis from Universitas Negeri Malang (2021) investigates "social stratification" within the novel, drawing direct parallels between the story's events and real-world inequality. This study highlights how discrimination based on appearance and economic condition is depicted as a central theme, using the text to illustrate pre-existing social problems. A third study from Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (2018) also utilizes a sociological perspective, arguing for the

novel's close relationship with the "social reality in America in the nineteenth century." This research concentrates on how the class dynamics in the story mirror the broader societal issues of Twain's own time, thereby using the novel as a historical and social document.

While these studies provide invaluable insights into the thematic content and social context of Twain's critique, they consistently treat the narrative as a transparent vessel *for* this content. They excel at identifying *what* Twain criticizes but leave a significant gap in the scholarly conversation regarding *how* the novel's narrative structure itself functions as the engine of this critique. A detailed investigation into the formal mechanics of the novel—its meticulously balanced parallel plotlines, its strategic use of alternating focalization, and its complex semiotics of clothing—has remained underexplored. These elements have not been thoroughly analyzed as the very mechanisms that generate the novel's critical power. The existing body of work describes the themes of injustice and inequality; it does not, however, fully explain their narrative production.

This research aims to fill that scholarly gap by applying a rigorous structuralist methodology. Structuralism, as a critical approach, posits that meaning is not inherent in individual elements but is generated by the relationships between them within a larger system. This perspective is particularly well-suited to *The Prince and the Pauper*, a novel that critics have noted for its formal coherence and symmetrical plot, distinguishing it from Twain's more famously episodic and sprawling works like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The central thesis of this paper is that the narrative architecture of *The Prince and the Pauper*—its binary oppositions, its narratological devices, and its symbolic systems—is the primary vehicle for Twain's ideological argument.

To substantiate this claim, this study will employ an integrated theoretical framework. First, it will utilize Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of binary oppositions to demonstrate how the foundational Prince/Pauper dyad structures the entire fictional world, creating a cascade of related oppositions (e.g., wealth/poverty, power/subjugation, justice/injustice) that organize every character, setting, and action. Second, drawing on the semiotics of Roland Barthes, the analysis will focus on clothing as an arbitrary but potent signifier, showing how the simple exchange of garments functions as a pivotal semiotic event that destabilizes identity and exposes social hierarchy as a construct of appearances. Finally, using the narratological tools of Gérard Genette, the study will examine the novel's parallel plot structure (*sjuzhet*) and its masterful use of alternating internal focalization. This analysis will argue that by forcing the reader to experience the palace through the pauper's eyes and the slums through the prince's, Twain creates a dialectical process that compels the reader to synthesize these perspectives and, in doing so, to actively construct the novel's critique. By shifting the analytical focus from content to form—from *what* the novel says to *how* it says it—this study will reveal that the novel's structure does not simply contain its message, but rather, it *is* the message.

Method

This research fundamentally adopts a descriptive qualitative design. This method is chosen because the research objective is not to measure data quantitatively but to provide an in-depth interpretation and detailed analysis of the novel's narrative structure and how that structure generates meaning. This approach facilitates a "close reading" of the text to uncover the underlying patterns of social critique within the work.

The data for this study are categorized into primary and secondary types.

1. **Primary Data:** The primary data is the text of the novel itself: *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain. The specific data points collected from the novel include narrations, character dialogues, and descriptions of settings and events that reveal the underlying structural patterns of the story.
2. **Secondary Data:** The secondary data consists of supporting academic materials. This includes books and articles on structuralist literary theory, scholarly journals on 19th-century American literature, and previous academic studies (theses and dissertations) on *The Prince and the Pauper*. These sources are used to build the theoretical framework and to position the current analysis within a broader scholarly context.

The data for this research was gathered through the following steps:

1. Library Research: A comprehensive search for relevant primary and secondary sources was conducted.
2. Close Reading: The primary source, *The Prince and the Pauper*, was read multiple times to ensure a thorough understanding of its plot, characters, and themes.
3. Data Noting: During the reading process, significant passages revealing key structural elements were identified, highlighted, and systematically noted. Each noted item was documented with its corresponding page number to ensure accuracy in the analysis and citation. Relevant theoretical concepts from secondary sources were also noted and cataloged.

The data analysis follows a descriptive qualitative procedure guided by a structuralist approach. The collected data is analyzed not merely to count conflicts, but to reveal the underlying system that produces them. The analysis is performed in three main stages:

1. Identification of Binary Oppositions: The primary data collected from the novel are first analyzed to identify the core binary oppositions that govern the narrative. This involves systematically categorizing characters, settings, and events according to structural dichotomies such as Prince/Pauper, Palace/Slum, Justice/Injustice, Appearance/Reality, and Freedom/Confinement.
2. Structural Interpretation: In the second stage, each identified binary opposition is interpreted to understand its function within the novel's total structure. The analysis focuses on how the plot, particularly the exchange of identities, acts as a 'transformation' that tests and reveals the nature of these oppositions. It examines how characters function not as psychologically deep individuals, but as embodiments of specific poles within the structure.
3. Synthesis and Conclusion: Finally, the findings from the interpretation are synthesized to form a holistic conclusion. This stage aims to demonstrate how the various surface-level conflicts (both internal and external) are generated by the novel's deep structure, thus offering a cohesive structuralist reading of the entire work.

Results

This chapter presents the analysis and findings of the research based on the structuralist methodology outlined in Chapter III. The analysis deconstructs Mark Twain's novel, *The Prince and the Pauper*, by examining its internal structures as a self-contained system. The primary focus is to identify the fundamental binary oppositions that govern the narrative,

generate conflict, and produce meaning. This chapter will demonstrate that the novel's conflicts are surface manifestations of a deeper, underlying structural framework. The discussion is organized thematically according to the primary oppositions identified within the text.

The Core Structural Opposition: Prince vs. Pauper

The most fundamental structure that underpins the entire narrative of *The Prince and the Pauper* is the binary opposition between the Prince (Edward Tudor) and the Pauper (Tom Canty). This opposition is not merely a distinction between two characters but represents the central organizing principle of the novel's world, creating a clear dichotomy between two poles of existence: royalty and poverty, power and powerlessness, privilege and destitution.

Twain establishes this structure by first creating an impossible physical similarity, which allows the structural poles to be exchanged. When the two boys meet and look in a mirror, their identical appearance erases their individual identities and reduces them to pure, interchangeable forms:

"The two stood side by side before a great mirror, and lo, a miracle: there did not seem to be any inequality between them. Their clothing, their bearing, their faces, their height, their figures, were all exactly alike. It was a startling and wonderful thing to see." (Chapter III, p. 25)

With this physical sameness as a fulcrum, Twain then builds the sharp contrast between their two worlds.

- The Prince's World (Royalty/Power): Edward Tudor's existence is a structure of immense privilege and rigid ceremony. His identity is defined by a complex system of servitude and luxury, highlighting a life of complete insulation from hardship.

"He had a lord in waiting, two grooms of the chamber, a master of the robes... He had three hundred and eighty-four servants in his palace of Westminster, and a guard of fifty men-at-arms." (Chapter II, p. 18)

This quotation shows that the Prince's identity is not personal but is a function within the large, complex structure of the court. He is defined by the number of people who serve him.

- The Pauper's World (Poverty/Powerlessness): In stark contrast, Tom Canty's world is a structure of chaos, filth, and brutal survival. Offal Court, his home, is the antithesis of the palace.

"Offal Court was a small, narrow, and dirty street, which led out of Pudding Lane... The house which Tom's family inhabited was in a ruinous state, and the rooms were small and bare. The whole family pigged together in one room." (Chapter II, p. 15)

The structure here is one of absence—an absence of space, cleanliness, and order. Tom's family "pigged together," a phrase that represents a complete inversion of the hierarchical structure that serves Edward.

Thematic Binary Oppositions Governing the Narrative

Flowing from the core opposition of Prince vs. Pauper, several other thematic binary oppositions structure the novel's world, plot, and character functions. These oppositions are not separate but are interconnected facets of the central dichotomy.

Palace vs. Slum: The Structural Function of Setting

The setting in the novel functions as more than just a backdrop; it is a physical manifestation of the central binary opposition. The Palace of Westminster and Offal Court are presented as two structurally opposing worlds.

- The Palace as a Structure of Order: The palace is depicted as a realm of absolute order, where even a meal becomes a complex, supervised ritual.

"The Prince of Wales dined alone. He was served by a kneeling nobleman, and the food was tasted before he ate it, lest it be poisoned." (Chapter IV, p. 35)

This analysis reveals the palace as a closed system governed by code and fear (of poison), a rigid and isolating order.

- The Slum as a Structure of Chaos: Offal Court is its direct antithesis. It is a space of disorder, where violence replaces law and order. Life there is governed not by ritual but by instant brutality.

"His father and grandmother were a couple of fiends... They were always drunk, and always fighting. The father's favourite amusement was to clout Tom's ears." (Chapter II, p. 16)

The violence from Tom's father is the form of "law" in Offal Court. This is a brutal and direct inversion of the ceremonial justice of the palace.

4.3.2. Justice vs. Injustice: The Structure of Law and Society

The novel presents Justice and Injustice not as moral choices but as conditions determined by one's position within the social structure.

- Injustice as the Norm for the Powerless: For the pauper, injustice is the default state. The law is depicted as a cruel, arbitrary machine that punishes the poor for minor offenses with extreme brutality. When Edward is disguised as a pauper, he witnesses this structure firsthand.

"He saw a man hanged for stealing a hawk which he had found... He saw a young apprentice mutilated for saying a word against the sacred person of the King... and he saw two women burned at the stake for being Baptists." (Chapter XVII, p. 155)

This quotation is a catalog of injustices. For Edward, this is a direct exposure to the 'Injustice' pole of England's legal structure, a reality he could never have seen from within the palace.

- Justice as a Privilege of the Powerful: Conversely, when Tom Canty occupies the throne, he unexpectedly acquires the ability to dispense Justice. He uses his common sense—born from his experience as a pauper—to overturn unjust laws.

In the case of the man accused of boiling the devil, Tom declares:

"The decree is rescinded. Let the accused go free. It is not a crime to boil the devil." (Chapter XV, p. 130)

Tom's actions demonstrate that Justice in the novel is a function of power. By occupying the Prince's position, he can manipulate the legal structure to produce a more rational justice, something impossible for him as Tom Canty.

4.3.3. Appearance vs. Reality: A Semiotic Structure

At its core, the novel's central conflict is semiotic (the study of signs), built upon the binary opposition of Appearance (Signifier) versus Reality (Signified). Clothing acts as the primary signifier of identity.

- Appearance as the Dominant Force: The world of the novel operates under the tyranny of appearance. Whoever wears the prince's clothes is the prince; whoever wears the pauper's rags is the pauper. The actual identity (the signified) becomes irrelevant in the

face of the external sign (the signifier). This is most evident when Edward is thrown out of his own palace.

"The soldiers seized him, and with a storm of cuffs and kicks they flung him out into the street. One of them said, 'Take that, thou beggar's spawn!' ... The Prince, bleeding and bruised, shouted, 'I am the Prince of Wales, my person is sacred; and you shall hang for laying your hands upon me!'" (Chapter IV, p. 38)

Edward's cry, "I am the Prince of Wales," is a claim to *reality*. However, his tattered clothes (*appearance*) are the only signifiers the guards respond to. Appearance has defeated reality.

- The Psychological Weight of Appearance: Even Tom Canty, who knows the truth, begins to succumb to the power of his appearance. He starts to enjoy the role of a prince, showing how an external structure can shape an internal reality.

"He began to enjoy his grandeur... He was the veritable King of England! He was bowed to, and knelt to, by nobles and princes... It was a grand thing to be a king!" (Chapter XIV, p. 120)

This quotation shows how Tom, despite his initial resistance, gradually accepts the identity conferred by his appearance, illustrating the power of a structure to shape the individual.

The Plot's Identity Swap as a Transformative Mechanism

The plot device of the identity swap is not arbitrary. In structuralist terms, it is the transformative mechanism that activates and explores the novel's binary oppositions. It is a controlled experiment where the two opposing poles are forced to switch places.

This transformation serves a crucial structural function:

1. It Reveals the Structure's Nature: By placing Edward in the slum and Tom in the palace, the true nature of each world and its underlying principles (justice, power, identity) is laid bare for both the characters and the reader.
2. It Mediates the Opposition: The experience transforms both boys. Edward learns empathy and the reality of injustice, which prepares him to be a just king. Tom learns the burdens and complexities of power. The transformation ultimately leads to a synthesis—a "better" prince who now understands both sides of the structural divide. The novel concludes with a new, more stable structure because its leader has integrated the knowledge of his opposite. This is affirmed in the novel's conclusion:

"He was a king who was merciful. He had a soft spot in his heart for the poor and the oppressed. Whenever a case of unusual hardship was brought before him, he was wont to say, 'What dost thou know of suffering and oppression? I and my people have been through it all.'" , p. 280

This concluding statement is the ultimate proof of the plot's transformative function. The new Edward is a synthesis of both Prince and Pauper. He has internalized both sides of the binary opposition, allowing him to rule with a complete, integrated understanding. Thus, the novel's structure not only presents conflict but also resolves it through a transformation that leads to an enlightened order.

Discussion

The previous chapter identified a series of fundamental binary oppositions that form the narrative scaffolding of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. This section discusses the theoretical implications of these findings, linking them directly to the core tenets of literary structuralism. The analysis demonstrates that the novel operates as a coherent, self-

regulating system, where meaning is generated not by its individual elements, but by the network of relationships between them.

The Primacy of Structure over Character and Plot

The findings validate a central structuralist principle: the primacy of the underlying structure over individual components like character or plot. In a structuralist reading, characters are not viewed as autonomous psychological beings but as "functions" or placeholders within a larger system. Our analysis shows that Edward Tudor and Tom Canty are not merely protagonists; they are the living embodiments of the novel's core binary poles: 'Prince' and 'Pauper'. Their actions, conflicts, and motivations are dictated by their position within this structure. This aligns with the theoretical foundation of this study, which posits that meaning is determined by the relationship between elements rather than the elements in isolation. The plot itself, particularly the identity swap, serves as the primary mechanism that sets this structure in motion, forcing an interaction between the opposing poles. Therefore, the conflict is not an arbitrary event but a necessary outcome of the novel's inherent structural tensions.

The Novel as a Semiotic System: Appearance vs. Reality

The identification of the 'Appearance vs. Reality' opposition as a key conflict reveals the novel's function as a semiotic system. As proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, language and narrative are systems of signs, each consisting of a *signifier* (the form, e.g., a word or image) and a *signified* (the concept). In *The Prince and the Pauper*, clothing serves as the dominant signifier of identity. The novel's central crisis is fundamentally a semiotic one: the signifier becomes detached from and more powerful than the signified.

No matter how vehemently Edward insists on his true identity (the signified), the world around him only responds to the signifier of his tattered clothes. Conversely, Tom is accepted as royalty based solely on the signifiers he wears—the crown and robes. This demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the sign as a key structuralist concept. The conflict is generated by this "semiotic breakdown," where the social code privileges the signifier to the complete exclusion of the signified, proving that identity within the novel's world is a communicable sign rather than an innate truth.

Transformation and Self-Regulation within the Narrative System

The findings also confirm the applicability of Piaget's concepts of 'transformation' and 'self-regulation' to a literary text, as mentioned in the theoretical framework. The plot of the identity exchange is the novel's primary transformation. It is a procedure that the system undergoes to test its own rules and boundaries. By forcing the Prince to experience the life of a Pauper and vice versa, the structure explores its own internal logic and contradictions.

Crucially, the system demonstrates self-regulation. It does not collapse under this transformation. Instead, it moves toward a new, more stable equilibrium. The novel concludes with Edward becoming a more merciful and just king precisely because he has integrated the experiences of the opposite pole. This resolution, where the protagonist is fundamentally changed and the kingdom is improved, shows the narrative structure regulating itself towards a state of synthesis and "wholeness." This reinforces the structuralist view of a literary work as an autonomous entity that contains its own procedures for transformation and resolution, without necessary reference to external factors.

Structuralist Reading as an Alternative to Historical Commentary

Finally, this structural analysis provides a distinct lens for understanding the novel's enduring appeal, offering an alternative to a purely historical or social-critical reading. A historical analysis might focus on Twain's critique of the Tudor monarchy or the specific social injustices of 16th-century England. While valid, such a reading ties the novel's meaning primarily to its historical context.

The structuralist approach, in contrast, argues that the novel's power derives from its engagement with timeless, universal structures of human thought—Justice vs. Injustice, Appearance vs. Reality, Order vs. Chaos. The historical setting of 16th-century England serves as the concrete material through which these abstract structures are explored. By revealing this underlying framework, the structuralist analysis explains why the story resonates with readers across different eras and cultures. The novel is not just about a specific prince and a specific pauper; it is about the universal human condition as defined by the binary structures that shape our understanding of the world.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to deconstruct the narrative of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* through a structuralist literary approach. The study aimed to move beyond a surface-level thematic analysis of conflict and instead uncover the deep, underlying structures that govern the novel's world, characters, and meaning. By applying the principles of structuralism, particularly the analysis of binary oppositions, this research has demonstrated that the novel operates as a coherent and self-regulating semiotic system.

The primary findings reveal that the narrative is built upon a series of fundamental binary oppositions. The core opposition of Prince vs. Pauper functions as the main axis around which all other structures revolve. This central dichotomy generates further thematic oppositions that shape the entire story, including Palace vs. Slum (as a structural representation of Order vs. Chaos), Justice vs. Injustice (as a condition determined by one's place in the social structure), and Appearance vs. Reality (as a semiotic conflict between the signifier and the signified). The plot's central device, the identity swap, was found to be the transformative mechanism that tests, explores, and ultimately mediates these oppositions, leading to a new, synthesized equilibrium in the novel's conclusion.

Therefore, the main contribution of this study is its demonstration that the enduring power of *The Prince and the Pauper* lies not merely in its social or historical commentary, but in its masterful use of universal, abstract structures. The conflicts experienced by the characters are shown to be logical outcomes of these inherent structural tensions. This analysis validates the structuralist approach as a highly effective tool for revealing the complex architecture of meaning in what might otherwise be seen as a simple children's adventure story. It repositions the novel as a sophisticated exploration of how social systems and signs construct human identity.

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